

The Medieval Justification of Kingship and its Ties to the Church

Research Thesis

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Introduction

The Book of Job is a story that is shared between the Hebrew and Christian Bibles which analyzes why God allows evil to exist when he is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent. Job is a faithful man who lives comfortably with wealth and a large family. In heaven, God asks Satan about Job's piety, and Satan contends that Job is only pious because of his worldly success and happiness. In response, God gives Satan permission to take Job's wealth and kill his family and servants in order to allow him to prove his faith. After Satan has done this, Job still praises God for giving him life and accepts that what is given may also be taken away. God then allows Satan to afflict Job's body with boils. Despite his wife's discontent with God's treatment of them, Job remains firm in his beliefs, saying, "Shall we receive good from God and shall we not receive evil?" When Job's friends later claim that his misfortune is a result of his own sin, Job reaches his breaking point and says that a just God would not treat him in such a way. Unsatisfied with this behavior, God speaks to Job through a whirlwind and dismisses his criticism, asking, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" Job repents and retracts his denunciation, admitting that his knowledge cannot challenge God's. Job is then returned to health and his family and wealth are similarly restored.

The Book of Job is an example of how submission is an essential tenet of Christianity. Being a faithful Christian requires one to believe in God's plan without question or complaint, something that could be applied to secular rulership as well. Peasants were expected to obey their lords and accept their place within the medieval hierarchy in a way similar to how Christians submit to God. The Book of Job was also clearly important to medieval Christians, with

Marsilius of Padua's *Defensor Pacis* quoting Job in its first lines.¹ The teachings of Christianity supported the feudal hierarchy as the will of God through the Bible's commentary on wealth. As Jesus says in the Bible, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God,"² and, "blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."³ Quotes like these from the central figure in the Christian religion would have logically made medieval peasants much more accepting of their lower-class status, clinging to the promise of eternal life in Heaven. Despite this praise of the impoverished and the blatant condemnation of wealth, medieval perceptions of who is "holy" often favored the powerful rather than the masses.

The version of kingship that came to be in the medieval era was a result of Western Europe's immersion in the Christian religion. Medieval monarchy is often viewed by historians as the inevitable system of government due to the strength and ubiquity of kingship in Europe. It is widely accepted that monarchy is the oldest form of government, existing before Greek democracy and Roman republicanism, and long before the feudal states of the medieval era. What seems difficult to explain is the Church's seemingly out-of-place endorsement of monarchical states in the medieval era, yet this support is much more complicated than meets the eye. Even going back as far as the Old Testament, the only form of government ever mentioned in the Bible is monarchy. As one might expect, the Bible despised certain monarchs and their practices and put hereditary practices under particular scrutiny. Still, it glorifies biblical kings, such as David and Solomon, and looks favorably upon the very real Cyrus the Great. This information leads one to quickly realize the Church's support of monarchies was not antithetical

¹ Marsilius of Padua, *Defensor Pacis*, trans. Alan Gewirth (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), 1.

² Mark 10:25 New International Version.

³ Luke 6:20 NIV.

to Christian values, provided that said support was contingent upon the behavior of the monarchs themselves.

While the codependent relationship between the Church and Europe's monarchies is far more complex than a simple exchange of power, things become even more muddled when trying to understand why the Church was such a stronger supporter of monarchy. According to numerous medieval Christian writers, power was bestowed by God and was therefore divine. This meant that anyone with power had been chosen by God, from kings and lords to the patriarch of a family of peasants.⁴ Such a notion portrays a highly interventionist God who supports those with power. In historian Janet Nelson's words, "Few scriptural tags were oftener quoted than Proverbs 21:1 — 'The heart of the king is in the hand of the Lord.'"⁵ If a kingdom was usurped, by this reasoning it is implied that God's blessing had been transferred from the previous king to the new one, such as with Saul and David. This outlook provided an excuse for the Church to back whomever may be in power without worrying about the continuity of the family line. Still, this fickle support was far from what the kings of Europe wanted to maintain their power, and thus many conditions were woven into medieval theology to limit what warranted dethronement and to emphasize the monarch's importance.

This relationship was not just one way. Medieval kings not only believed that God gave them their power, but also that they were the representatives of their people in God's ear. Thus, medieval kings justified their power through their supposed connection with God. Since kings were seen as having the favor of God, they were seen as the bridge between their subjects and

⁴ Henry de Bracton. *De Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae: Libri Quinque in Varios Tractatus Distincti*. Ed. Travers Twiss. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 305.

⁵ Janet Nelson, "Kingship and Empire." in *The Cambridge History of Medieval Politic Thought c.350-c.1450*, ed. J.H. Burns (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 218.

God, essentially acting as a priestlike mediator.⁶ Royal law, which reflected God's law, was another avenue for connecting monarchs to divinity. Just and fairly enforced laws were seen by many as necessary to build a virtuous kingdom, and the king's position at the top of the legal hierarchy meant that he was a crucial factor in this objective. Medieval legal texts referred to kings as "the vicar of god," making their decisions nearly divine.⁷ Additionally, the idea of hereditary kingship became commonplace despite the Bible's rejection of it, with the pope supporting hereditary monarchy with the conditions of his perception of a quality rule being maintained.

The importance of Christianity in the life of medieval Europe cannot be understated. In the early Middle Ages, if a medieval king converted to Christianity, his entire kingdom was expected to follow suit. Over the centuries such a requirement practically became moot as the religion integrated itself into European cultures, making it so that medieval Europeans were simply following tradition rather than being forced into their faith. The Church also held significant political power due to its abundance of followers in numerous European kingdoms, acting as the overarching religious authority over most of the continent. As a result, from the coronation of Charlemagne up until the Protestant Reformation, the Church and its papacy held a powerful sway over nearly every European state. The codependent relationship between monarchy and the Church allowed the powerful to justify their position through the teachings of the Bible while rejecting criticism by citing some form of divine choosing.

The approach for researching this thesis was based on evaluating a collection of primary sources such as the Bible, writings from classical Greek and Roman philosophers, and

⁶ John Dickinson. "The Mediaeval Conception of Kingship and Some of Its Limitations, as Developed in the Policraticus of John of Salisbury," *Speculum* 1, no. 3 (1926): 314.

⁷ Bracton, 305.

contemporary commentary on medieval kingship. Modern secondary sources were also used to supplement any missing knowledge and provide various arguments for analysis. The idea that monarchies and the Church were complementary is nothing new, yet historians often fail to highlight how the Bible and its doctrines contributed to the Church's ability to support their secular counterparts. This thesis will examine medieval ideas of rulership, to demonstrate how deeply indebted it was to Christian thinking, such that even when ideas came from outside of Christianity, they needed to be Christianized in order to render them acceptable. A comparison of medieval political philosophies and their predecessors will emphasize the impact that Christianity had on political thought while also providing an explanation for the origins of other ideas.

The Thinkers

Despite their great cultural and ideological differences, the views of classical Greek philosophers on monarchy and rulership were reconcilable with medieval Christian views. One fact to take into consideration is the often critical view that Greek philosophers showed towards their contemporary democracy. Importantly, the three most notable Greek philosophers, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, were all born into relatively wealthy families, allowing them to be educated. This economic privilege affected their views on wealth and those who have it, contributing to their conclusions that a government that favored the poor through a form of majority rule was not ideal. The ideas of these three philosophers were not independent from one another, as Socrates taught Plato and Plato, in turn, taught Aristotle, creating a line of great thinkers. Socrates never wrote anything down, and thus most of our knowledge about his philosophies come from Plato's *Dialogues*. Considering that much of Aristotle's work was not introduced to Europe until the

twelfth century, particularly his *Politics*, Plato served as the primary source of Greek philosophical knowledge during the early medieval era. Much like his beloved mentor Socrates and his student Aristotle, Plato envisioned a government controlled by philosophers.⁸ Plato's ideology diverges from Aristotle's in more social aspects, with him supporting the abolition of private property and even families, creating a community-based system.⁹ Still, Plato believed in a class-system, something that Thomas More sought to correct.¹⁰ Many of Plato's ideas may have been radical, but his notions on communal ideals can be seen as being reflected in medieval monasticism.¹¹ Monks were typically some of the more educated members of their communities with heavy restrictions on what property they were allowed to have. While ideas such as communal wives and class systems were certainly not present in monastic life, these well-educated monks without private property provided a microcosm of some of Plato's philosophies.

Once Aristotle's *Politics* was "rediscovered" in medieval Europe, his work influenced medieval thinkers greatly. In *Politics*, Aristotle evaluates the strength and efficacy of various forms of government, focusing mostly on the good a government does for its people. Aristotle labels the constitutions of these three forms of government as "good": aristocracies, polities, and monarchies. He reasons that if there is a "pre-eminent individual" in a state, that person should be made king.¹² It seems strange to see a classical Greek philosopher who lived in the Athenian democracy supporting such an autocratic type of government as monarchy, but this endorsement comes with many conditions. Aristotle notes that all three "good" constitutions can decay into his

⁸ Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Moscow, ID: Roman Roads Media, 2013), 195.

⁹ Plato, 183.

¹⁰ John A. Gueguen, "Reading More's 'Utopia' as a Criticism of Plato," *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* vol. 10 (1978): 44.

¹¹ Benjamin Blosser, "The Reception of Greek Ethics in Christian Monastic Writings," in *The Reception of Greek Ethics in Late Antiquity and Byzantium*, ed. Sophia A. Xenophontos and Anna Marmodoro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 116.

¹² Aristotle. *Aristotle's Politics*, ed. by Benjamin Jowett (New York: Modern Library, 1943), 37.

three “bad” constitutions: oligarchies, extreme democracies, and tyranny.¹³ According to Aristotle, a poorly sustained monarchy will become tyrannical due to the rash and unfocused decision-making of the king. Furthermore, in a strange contradiction to his former “good” designation of monarchy, Aristotle remarks that “Monarchy arose to meet the needs of primitive society, but is now obsolete and objectionable on various grounds.” Aristotle expands this idea with the notions that monarchies often become hereditary, but one person can be misguided by passions, and no one person can handle the entirety of a government’s duties. Despite this criticism, Aristotle adds that “one situation alone can be imagined in which Absolute Kingship would be just,” presumably if there is such a virtuous individual as he previously mentioned.¹⁴ Aristotle stresses that the quality of kingship is dependent on the morality and education of the ruler, failing when the king becomes selfish or misinformed. Overall, Aristotle’s evaluation of monarchy is not at odds with the views of medieval Christians. According to medieval lords and kings, their power was given to them by God, making them a perfect example of the “pre-eminent individual” that Aristotle described.

To medieval scholars, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle were seen as sources of useful knowledge and wisdom. In his book *Policraticus*, a mirror for princes,¹⁵ John of Salisbury referenced all three philosophers by using their ideas as building blocks and support for his own convictions. In *Defensor Pacis*, Marsilius of Padua (d. 1342) presented his first of three discourses greatly influenced by Aristotle.¹⁶ The first two discourses of *Defensor Pacis* are presented as a balance between reason and faith, as Marsilius used the New Testament in the

¹³ Aristotle, 37.

¹⁴ Aristotle, 38.

¹⁵ Mirrors for princes were essentially guidebooks for rulers and how they should behave.

¹⁶ Marsilius, xxi.

second discourse to affirm the ideas introduced in the first.¹⁷ This is one of the more obvious examples of how medieval scholars did not believe that the Greek philosophers' paganism reduced the usefulness of their ideas. Marsilius references both Aristotle and Plato in the first chapter, "On the General Aim of the Discussion, the Cause of that Aim, and the Division of the Book."¹⁸ He further bases his analysis of the proper functioning of a state on Aristotle's *Politics*, calling him the "foremost of the philosophers."¹⁹ While Marsilius did seemingly find it necessary to support Aristotle's ideas through Christianity in the second discourse, he is reinforcing them instead of discrediting Aristotle's views. As Alan Gewirth puts it in the introduction to his translation of *Defensor Pacis*, "reason and revelation, Aristotle and the New Testament, are in complete agreement."²⁰

The Anointed Ones

The Christian Bible offered support for monarchies that aligned with Aristotle's view of an ideal monarchy. The best example of this is through the biblical kings of Israel, particularly Saul, David, and Solomon. The biblical account of Saul's life provided a stark example of how good kings could be corrupted by paranoia and self-aggrandizement. Saul was the first king of Israel, anointed by the prophet Samuel in private before Samuel organized the Israelites to select him as king. Saul's military victory over the contending Ammonites solidified his position in the eyes of the people, and his first act as king was to forbid retribution against his rivals for the throne. Saul continued his success by launching campaigns against several neighboring

¹⁷ Marsilius, xxi.

¹⁸ Marsilius, 5.

¹⁹ Marsilius, 13.

²⁰ Marsilius, xxi.

kingdoms, and “wherever he turned, he was victorious.”²¹ Nevertheless, Saul’s favor with both Samuel and God soon began to dwindle. During his campaign against the Philistines, Saul disobeyed Samuel’s orders by performing an unauthorized sacrifice. Later, when Samuel instructed Saul to “destroy the Amalekites,”²² meaning to kill all the people and their livestock, Saul completed most of the task but spared the king and the best livestock. God’s orders were certainly typical of his Old Testament-style wrath, and though Saul may have been seen more favorably if he had instead chosen to spare the children, his decision to save the best livestock showed his greed. Upon learning of Saul’s disobedience, Samuel told Saul that God had rejected him as king, and Samuel himself executed the Amalekite king. As a result of this rejection, soon Saul’s faith and moments of benevolence would turn into paranoia and fury.

David’s virtues made him the perfect candidate for an Aristotelian or Christian king, with his righteousness culminating in his victory against Goliath. After Samuel told Saul that God has rejected him, he went to Bethlehem and met a man named Jesse and his sons. Each of Jesse’s sons was brought before Samuel, and each was dismissed until the youngest, a boy named David, was anointed as king by Samuel. Putting his divine plan into place, God sent an evil spirit to torment Saul, who requested music to soothe himself. A servant suggested that a son of Jesse named David could fulfill this role as he was “skillful in playing, a man of valor, a warrior, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence; and the Lord is with him.”²³ David played the harp for Saul and was effective in easing the king’s pain. When war broke out between the Philistines and Israel, the two armies met on the battlefield and the Philistines sent their champion, Goliath, to challenge one of the Israelites. No Israelite stepped forward to fight, but

²¹ 1 Samuel 14:47-48 New Living Translation.

²² 1 Samuel 15:3 Easy-to-Read Version.

²³ 1 Samuel 16:18 New Revised Standard.

when David arrived to deliver food to his older brothers in the army, he boasted that he could defeat Goliath. When his confident claim reached Saul, the king appointed David as his champion. Already this decision was seen as unfavorable to the Israeli people, as Saul's physical height and inherent responsibility to the people should have made him the prime candidate to fight Goliath. In contrast with Saul's cowardice despite his physical gifts, David was not even a soldier and still showed bravery that no other man in Israel could. After David famously killed Goliath with a single shot from a sling, which further showed his craftiness and intelligence, the Israelites began to see David as a hero. This public praise led Saul to view David as a rival, and caused him to make many attempts to rid himself of this threat.

Saul's death and David's ascension to the throne provided a blueprint for how power should be transferred from person to person within Christianity. Sparked by his jealousy of David's renown, on two separate occasions Saul threw a spear at David while he was playing the harp. In a more indirect attempt to kill David, Saul offered his daughter, Michal, as David's bride, providing he could collect the foreskins of one hundred Philistine, hoping that David would die in this effort.²⁴ David accepted Saul's bride price and even brought two hundred Philistine foreskins, earning Saul's daughter's hand in marriage. Next, Saul sent assassins to kill David, but Michal helped him escape from her father's wrath. David fled the capital of Gibeah and sought refuge with a high priest in a town called Nob before he moved on. Saul learned of David's sanctuary in Nob after his departure and ordered eighty-six priests and the entire town to be executed. Saul's actions in response to David's rise in popularity show how abuses of power like his were regarded as the behavior of a king who had lost God's blessing. This corruption was contrasted with David's restraint, as David twice stopped his men from killing Saul when they

²⁴ 1 Samuel 18:25 NIV.

could have easily done so. Instead, David stole Saul's spear and water jug while leaving his own spear to show Saul that he could have killed him but did not. This convinced Saul to reconcile with David, and after they made peace the two never met again. While preparing for another battle with the Philistines, Saul sought out the counsel of a witch in Endor, even though Saul himself had made witchcraft punishable by death. The witch conjured a spirit who appeared to be Samuel, and Samuel once again told Saul that God had rejected him, and that Saul would die the next day in battle. Samuel's prediction came true, and the throne was finally available for God's anointed king.

Saul's reign is a prime example of how divine favor can be taken away just as easily as it is given. Saul was initially chosen by God to lead the Israelites, and thus found great success in the early days of his rule. Following a couple of instances of disobedience, God revoked Saul's anointment, and it passed to David. The Bible says, "Saul died for his unfaithfulness which he had committed against the Lord, because he did not keep the word of the Lord, and also because he consulted a medium for guidance."²⁵ This condemnation of Saul's offenses shows how the ideal Christian king was meant to act. Saul's impatience in waiting for Samuel to perform sacrifices was the first offense. His decision not to kill the Amalekite king and their best livestock showed his greed, and this was the event in which Saul lost God's anointment. Lastly, Saul's visit to a medium was against both God's law and Saul's, and this choice dissipated the last of God's favor. Medieval thinkers recognized the immorality of a king not following their own laws, with many stressing the importance of "laws binding the lawgiver."²⁶ The story of

²⁵ 1 Chronicles 10:13 New King James Version.

²⁶ Bracton, 305.

Saul could be seen as a cautionary tale for medieval kings and provided ammunition for rivals to criticize their rule.

David's reign as king shows how even the most virtuous of God's chosen rulers could be corrupted. Saul was dead, and David became the rival of Saul's son, Ish-Bosheth, who was eventually murdered by his own captains, leaving David free to unite the Israelites under his rule. David conquered Jerusalem and made it his new capital, bringing the Ark of the Covenant into the city with plans to build a temple to God. The prophet Nathan forbids the construction though, saying that one of his sons will build the temple. Nathan also tells David that God has decreed that "your throne shall be established forever."²⁷ David then engaged in war campaigns against various neighboring groups, gaining glory and expanding his territory. While in Jerusalem during his army's siege of Rabbah, David saw a beautiful woman bathing on the roof of her home and inquired about who she was. David learned that she was Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah the Hittite, one of David's best soldiers. Unbothered by loyalty to one of his subjects, David summoned Bathsheba and impregnated her.²⁸ David then called Uriah the Hittite back from the battlefield in hopes that he would return to his wife, sleep with her, and believe that the child was his own. In contrast to David's impulsiveness, Uriah refused to lay with his wife while other soldiers were still in combat. Realizing his affair with Bathsheba would soon be exposed, David ordered Uriah to fight on the front line while his comrades stayed back, allowing the enemy soldiers to kill Uriah. This plan was successful, and David married Bathsheba, but Nathan and God vehemently disapproved. Nathan arrived in David's court and told the king the parable of the rich man and poor man. The rich man had many sheep, and the poor man had only one ewe for which to care.

²⁷ 2 Samuel 7:16 NIV.

²⁸ David's meeting with Bathsheba can also be interpreted as rape, but historically the distinction between consensual and non-consensual intercourse was often not acknowledged.

When a traveler approached the rich man for food, he killed the poor man's ewe and prepared it for a meal. David became enraged that such a man could go unpunished, but Nathan responds by saying "You are the man!"²⁹ Nathan continued by saying that God had made David king of Israel, given him Saul's house and wives, and would have given him even more if that was not enough. Nathan lamented that David ignored this generosity and committed an evil act in God's eyes by killing Uriah and taking his wife. In a much different prophecy than the first, Nathan declared that "the sword will never depart from your house,"³⁰ meaning that his lineage will always be consumed in fighting. David apologized and admitted his sins, and Nathan told him that he will not die, but the sons he shared with Bathsheba will. The rest of David's reign was soured by the rebellions of two of his sons, and David declared to Solomon, one of his sons with Bathsheba, that he would be his successor.

King David is one of the most historically influential people in the Bible. Aside from Moses, David is likely the most iconic character from the Old Testament. Both Donatello and Michelangelo created vastly influential statues of the king; the Israeli flag bears the Star of David; and the story of David and Goliath is referenced constantly in sports and life. David and Solomon were also frequent models for mirrors for princes, or medieval how-to guides for rulers. Pepin the Short, Charlemagne's father, saw France as a "new Israel." Charlemagne expanded on this idea by projecting the image of Charlemagne as the "new David."³¹ These comparisons show how many medieval Christians idolized David despite his sins. Additionally, God himself never recanted the idea that David's "throne would be established forever." While David had certainly lived a glorious life up until the point where Nathan told him this, David's later actions

²⁹ 2 Samuel 12:7 NIV.

³⁰ 2 Samuel 12:10 NIV.

³¹ Nelson, 214-215.

were viewed unfavorably by God, warranting the line about his house always being in conflict. David's son, Solomon, was as flawed as his father, yet received similar praise from medieval theorists.³²

The story of the life of King Solomon highlights how biblical figures were idolized despite their flaws. On his deathbed, King David instructed his heir to follow in the ways of the Lord, but also take revenge against his enemies.³³ At only age fifteen, Solomon began his reign by executing a purge of his rivals in a way that reminds one of Josef Stalin.³⁴ The biblical accounts of Solomon's reign focus on the king's governance far more than that of his predecessors. Solomon's kingdom thrived on trade, and the Kingdom of Israel was at its economic peak under his rule.³⁵ As a result, Solomon was able to surround himself with luxuries that were greater than any other monarch.³⁶ Perhaps most importantly, Solomon commissioned the construction of the First Temple of Jerusalem, otherwise known as Solomon's Temple.³⁷ The famed Ark of the Covenant was to be stored in the temple until the temple's destruction at the hands of Babylonian emperor, Nebuchadnezzar, when the Ark was lost.³⁸ Still, Solomon's defining characteristic was his wisdom.³⁹ When God appeared to Solomon after a sacrifice, He asked him what he wanted from Him. Selflessly, Solomon asked for the wisdom to better rule and guide his people.⁴⁰ More than satisfied with Solomon's request, God rewarded Solomon with great wisdom, riches, and glory.⁴¹ In the Judgement of Solomon, two women came to the king

³² John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, ed. Cary J. Nederman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 40.

³³ 1 Kings 2:1-9 NKJV.

³⁴ 1 Kings 2:13-46 NKJV.

³⁵ 1 Kings 10:27.

³⁶ 1 Kings 10:18-21 NKJV.

³⁷ 1 Kings 6:9 NKJV.

³⁸ 1 Kings 8:6 NKJV.

³⁹ 1 Kings 2:30-31 NKJV.

⁴⁰ 1 Kings 3:9 NKJV.

⁴¹ 1 Kings 3:10-14 NKJV.

claiming to be the mother of the same child. Solomon resolved this conflict by ordering the child to be split in half and shared between the two women, prompting one of the women to renounce her claim. Solomon decided that this woman was the true mother of the child as she would rather give up the child than see it killed, and he gave the whole child back to her.⁴²

From a Christian perspective, despite his favorable acts, Solomon also had many flaws. Firstly, Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, and he even allowed these wives and concubines to maintain their foreign religions.⁴³ Worse yet, Solomon built temples to two of these foreign gods, an act of which the Bible explicitly disapproved.⁴⁴ In Deuteronomy, kings are commanded not to have multiple wives or horses and to refrain from hoarding wealth.⁴⁵ Solomon had almost twice as many wives as there are days in a year, and his kingdom collected six hundred and sixty-six talents in the same amount of time.⁴⁶ Aside from this being a forebodingly evil number, this revenue made Solomon easily one of the richest men of his time. Lastly, Solomon had a multitude of horses and chariots that he had obtained from as far away as Egypt.⁴⁷ As a result of his sins, God punished Solomon by dividing his kingdom upon his death, but leaving some lands for Solomon's son to rule due to his great affection for David.⁴⁸

The biblical accounts of the lives of Saul, David, and Solomon show how power corrupts those who possess it. King Saul is the most striking example of this fall from grace, acting as a model for how not to conduct one's rule. Saul was initially chosen by God to be the first king of Israel, an honor which has a biblical importance that cannot be understated. Saul found success

⁴² 1 Kings 3:16-28 NKJV.

⁴³ 1 Kings 11:3-4 NKJV.

⁴⁴ 1 Kings 11:7-8 NKJV.

⁴⁵ Deuteronomy 17:16-17 NIV.

⁴⁶ 1 Kings 10:14 NIV.

⁴⁷ 1 Kings 4:26 NKJV

⁴⁸ 1 Kings 11:11-13 NKJV.

early on in his reign, but soon succumbed to greed and self-importance, disobeying God and attempting to bring harm to David. Of the three, King David was undoubtedly God's favorite, being revered as a model hero during his youth. David was faithful, intelligent, and talented, his ingenuity and bravery culminating in his victory over Goliath. David was anointed by God as well, but became a shadow of his former self later on in his reign. While once he had been unwilling to kill Saul despite his evil, David ordered the killing of Uriah the Hittite in order to marry Bathsheba. Still, unlike Saul or Solomon, God forgave David and even upheld his promises to David after his death. Although there is little information in the Bible about Solomon's life before his rule, Solomon's remarkable wisdom deeply contrasted with his unfaithful ways. Solomon went directly against God's will by having too many luxuries and wives, even submitting to idolatry. While some medieval writers praised David and Solomon despite their sins, Pope Gregory the Great singled Saul out for his corruption. Pope Gregory described Saul during his reign as, "desirous of being honoured before the people while unwilling to be publicly blamed, he cut off from himself even him who had anointed him to the kingdom."⁴⁹ Furthermore, Pope Gregory criticized David's affair with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah, remarking that, "he had been unwilling to smite his captured persecutor; and afterwards, with loss to his wearied army, he destroyed even his devoted soldier."⁵⁰ Pope Gregory's commentary on these biblical kings shows that the flaws in their rule were not forgotten or overlooked during the medieval period; instead, they became prime examples of how men with strong morals could be contaminated by the allure of power. John of Salisbury also refers to King David as "the best of the kings about whom I have read," even though he

⁴⁹ Gregory, *The Book of Pastoral Rule*, trans. James Barmby (Aeterna Press, 2016), Ch. III.

⁵⁰ Gregory, Ch. III.

acknowledges David's sin in the killing of Uriah the Hittite.⁵¹ Additionally, John calls Saul a "tyrant" and uses him as a template for how a king can abuse God's favor.⁵² John's incredible praise of David highlights how highly the best of these biblical kings were regarded and were seen as the image of a great king, while John's condemnation of Saul shows how the worst were made into a cautionary tale for medieval rulers.

The Heathens

Given their prominence in the Bible, it is not surprising that medieval writers would praise David and Solomon. Their admiration of pre-Christian Roman emperors is far more puzzling. One writer who was particularly enamored with the ancient world was John of Salisbury (d. 1180), a twelfth-century scholar and the author of the political treatise, *Policraticus*. John of Salisbury was a clergyman and a theologian, joining the court of the Archbishop of Canterbury and meeting the not-yet-famous Thomas Becket (d. 1170). John also had an interesting relationship with the English monarchy, being exiled from England twice during his lifetime.⁵³ While the reasons for his first exile at the command of Henry II (d. 1189) are unknown, John's second exile was caused by his support for Thomas Becket who had become the Archbishop of Canterbury and battled with Henry II over the independence of the Church.

John's *Policraticus* was written after his return to England from his first exile, and his contempt for Henry II is made apparent throughout the piece. As one might discern from the title of his work, John saw himself as a successor to the Greek philosophers, even referencing Greek

⁵¹ John of Salisbury, 209.

⁵² John of Salisbury, 33.

⁵³ John of Salisbury, xxix.

rhetorician Isocrates' idea of knowing nothing in the prologue.⁵⁴ Later in the book, John turned the discussion to the Roman Empire, criticizing the tyranny of the emperors and their pagan religion. John criticized their centralized rule: "so long as all are led by a single preeminent will, they are deprived of their own free will, universally and individually." John also wrote that, "the whole populace despises calm and peace," in reference to the Roman people.⁵⁵ Still, in the same book, John praised the rule of Trajan and Julius Caesar. In a chapter titled "Why Trajan seems preferable to all others," John said that Trajan was "brave and civilised" for expanding the Roman Empire's territory, contradicting his criticism of the violence of the Roman people.⁵⁶ John further elaborated that Trajan "built the majesty of his reign solely upon the practice of virtue," while "oppressing no one" and "conducting himself as the equal of everyone in Rome."⁵⁷ Anyone aware of the Roman policy on Christians will immediately pause at John's claim that he oppressed no one, as Trajan participated in the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire. Still, in John's defense, Trajan forbade his people from hunting Christians, preferring that they focus on and punish those Christians who disrupt the peace.⁵⁸ According to *Policraticus* and Christian lore, John was not alone in his admiration for Trajan, with Pope Gregory the Great being so distraught by Trajan's descent into hell that he begged God to hold him back from the fires.⁵⁹ John also noted that medieval councilors acclaimed their kings by saying, "may you be luckier than Augustus and better than Trajan." Julius Caesar also got a nod from John, who said "it is fitting that one laud Julius for the greatness of his invincible spirit and of his powerful works, since his mind and valour were sufficient to do impossible feats."⁶⁰ John's reverence for

⁵⁴ John of Salisbury, 4.

⁵⁵ John of Salisbury, 23.

⁵⁶ John of Salisbury, 79.

⁵⁷ John of Salisbury, 79-80.

⁵⁸ Thompkins, Stephen, "Pliny's Letter to Trajan," ed. Dan Graves. Christian History Institute.

⁵⁹ John of Salisbury, 80.

⁶⁰ John of Salisbury, 79.

these pagan figures is surprising, especially given his clerical vocation, showing how these figures were well-respected in the medieval era. It is difficult to reconcile John's respect of Trajan and Julius Caesar with his hatred for their subjects, administrative structure, and warmongering tendencies, however it is not entirely impossible. The basis of what John viewed as a good ruler was not centered around these aspects, but rather was subject to the individual ruler's character. John revered Trajan's humility and just nature, calling him "the best among the gentile emperors," and pushing aside the obvious criticisms he might have had of the Roman state with the line, "if anyone disputes Trajan's faith or morals, these could be ascribed to the times rather than to the man."⁶¹ John does not see Trajan as just a good ruler worthy of praise, but also as that "his reputation for goodness is made so powerful that he stands out to friendly admirers and flatterers alike as the most magnificent of all examples."⁶² Much like Aristotle, this perspective indicates that John believed that it was beneficial to have centralized power when a moral individual could carry that burden.

The importance of these biblical, legendary, and historical figures in the medieval era is highlighted by the existence of the Nine Worthies, figures who were meant to personify the medieval ideal of chivalry. The Nine Worthies consisted of three pagans (Hector, Alexander the Great, and Julius Caesar), three Jews (Joshua, David, and Judas Maccabeus), and three Christians (King Arthur, Charlemagne, and Godfrey of Bouillon). The inclusion of Jews and more importantly pagans further illustrates how significant pre-Christians could be treated with the same reverence as Christians during the medieval era. The Nine Worthies were featured in

⁶¹ John of Salisbury, 50, 65.

⁶² John of Salisbury, 79.

numerous medieval artworks, including carvings in Cologne's historic City Hall and statues in Nuremberg.⁶³

Constantine expectedly held a special place in the hearts of medieval European writers as a model for kingship because of his relationship with Christianity. While Constantine's personal beliefs are up to debate, he undoubtedly helped the Christian religion in ways that changed the future of Europe and the world. The story goes that before a battle, Constantine received a sign from Heaven in the form of a vision in the sky. What Constantine supposedly saw has been debated, but the consensus is that Constantine believed it to be a Christian symbol and had the sign painted on his soldiers' shields. Constantine's army won the battle and this event prompted him to legalize Christianity, and by some accounts to convert soon after. Although this story's historicity is questionable, it is important since it was the tale that medieval scholars learned.⁶⁴ Later in his life, Constantine publicly self-identified as a Christian, but since he was not baptized until he was on his deathbed it is difficult to say how devout the emperor was. Regardless of his own views, Constantine's contributions to the explosion of Christianity in Europe cannot be understated. Firstly, Constantine helped create the Edict of Milan, which ended the centuries-long oppression of Christians under the Roman Empire. Secondly, Constantine organized the First Council of Nicaea, an important step towards reaching a consensus in Christian beliefs, and the event that birthed the Nicene Creed. Lastly, Constantine ordered the building of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre over where Jesus' tomb supposedly was, a site that would be considered the holiest place in all of Christendom. It is easy to see how the legalization and promotion of

⁶³ Andrey Egorov, "Charismatic Rulers in Civic Guise: Images of the Nine Worthies in Northern European Town Halls of the 14th to 16th Centuries," in *Faces of Charisma: Image, Text, Object in Byzantium and the Medieval West*. Leiden: Brill, ed. Bedos-Rezak, Brigitte and Martha Dana Rust (2018), 205.

⁶⁴ Roberto M. Rodriguez, *The Conversion of Constantine*, (Lulu Press, 2011) 10-14.

Christianity in one of the largest empires to ever exist would impact the religion's popularity and thus made Constantine a hero in the eyes of Christians.

Constantine's cooperation with the church set the model for the codependent relationship between the church and state that can be seen in the medieval era. Constantine's perceived religious authority which was derived from his importance in the rise of Christianity provided an opportunity for the papacy to seek leverage over temporal rulers. John of Salisbury referred to Constantine as being "distinguished by perpetual benediction for founding and endowing the Roman Church, not to speak of his other eminent deeds."⁶⁵ While Saint Peter is regarded as the founder of the papacy, the medieval era birthed a narrative that Constantine had given power over the Western Roman Empire to the pope. In reality, this idea was fabricated by Pope Stephen II in the eighth century through a forged imperial decree, called the Donation of Constantine, in an attempt to promote the papacy's authority over secular rulers.⁶⁶ The conflict between Pope Stephen II and Pepin the Short can be described as a battle fought by connections to important figures in Christianity. Pepin's view that his Frankish kingdom was the new Israel clashed with the concept of papal supremacy over all of Christian Europe, particularly the lands once held by the Roman Empire. Still, the two powers found agreement through an exchange in which Pope Stephen anointed Pepin and Pepin gave the papacy lands in Italy.⁶⁷ On the one hand, Pepin's anointment by the pope can be seen as mirroring Saul and David's anointments by Samuel and Solomon's by Nathan, further strengthening Pepin's desired biblical ties. On the other hand, the papacy received the critically important city of Rome and other surrounding territories, making

⁶⁵ John of Salisbury, 43.

⁶⁶ "On the "discourse on the forgery of the alleged donation of Constantine." UMBC.edu (University of Maryland, Baltimore County, n.d.).

⁶⁷ Courtney E. Bowers, "Pepin, Power and the Papacy: The First True Holy Roman Emperor," in *The Histories*, (La Salle University, 2019), 15-16.

the pope both a secular and religious ruler for the first time. Through Pepin's anointment, the pope also gained symbolic power over Christian rulers. This was a vital step towards the creation of the Holy Roman Empire, particularly considering that a young Charlemagne was anointed as well. Charlemagne's anointment not only was the likely inspiration for his later coronation at the hands of Pope Leo III, but also reinforced the idea that hereditary kingship was supported by the Church.⁶⁸

The Legends

Both the philosophies of ancient thinkers as well as biblical examples of once great kings laid for the foundation for ideas of medieval kingship. In turn, kings justified their positions of authority through the use of origin myths grounded in ancient history and mythology. The use of Roman, Christian, and mythological figures for creating a grandiose history of European kingdoms and their rulers was a regular occurrence in the medieval era. Examples of this can be found in medieval Britain, where a few origin myths were prevalent and used as justification for the power of monarchs. John of Salisbury said that Constantine the Great was of "British stock," a strange yet telling fabrication.⁶⁹ John's inclusions of these beliefs show that such connections were valued and seemed to be worth remarking upon. King Arthur also provided an important connection to the English monarchies, acting as a legendary ancestor to the English royal family. While today Arthur's historicity is questionable and he even originated as a Welsh folk hero, he is remembered for his ties to England today. Arthur became the king of England, Ireland, Wales, and Scotland. Because English Kings believed themselves descended from Arthur, this set the precedent for England being considered the rightful ruler of all of the British Isles, giving the

⁶⁸ Bowers, 15.

⁶⁹ John of Salisbury, 3.

English a perceived superiority over their Celtic neighbors. The Arthurian legend also claimed that Arthur successfully defended the British Isles from Anglo-Saxon invaders in the early sixth century, a narrative that attributes greatness to a period of English history in which few could take pride. After all, England was under Roman control until early in the fifth century, with the Anglo-Saxons settling in England soon after. The Roman exit from England created a historical blind spot and eventually, Arthur would fill this gap.

Much of the English usurpation of the Arthurian legend occurred due to the efforts of King Edward I (d. 1307), as Edward idolized Arthur and attempted to draw connections between himself and the legendary king. Notably, Edward's two most recent predecessors were King Henry III (d. 1272), his father, and King John, his grandfather. King John (d. 1216), who is often regarded as one of the worst English kings, lost the Duchy of Normandy to the French and even more significantly appended his seal to the Magna Carta in order to placate his rebelling vassals. As a result of the strife that John caused within the English kingdom, Henry III sought to strengthen his position as king by creating a connection to his royal predecessor, Saint Edward the Confessor (d. 1066).⁷⁰ Edward was both a saint and the last king of England before the Norman conquest, giving him a place of high esteem in medieval English history, and Henry named his heir, Edward I, after his hero. Unfortunately for Edward I, Henry III was characterized as a "weak and ineffectual king" by some of his contemporaries, meaning that Edward had no recent ancestors to emulate.⁷¹ As a result, Edward turned to King Arthur in an attempt to solidify his claim to the English throne. Edward tried to mirror his idol's balance of military success and chivalry during his reign. Edward was able to both show his military prowess and strengthen his

⁷⁰ James Turner, "In Search of the Once and Future King: Arthur and Edward I," Medievalists.net, (September 27, 2020.)

⁷¹ Turner.

connection to King Arthur through his conquest of Wales, becoming the first English king to rule over Wales. Edward then took the Welsh crown and ceremoniously placed it before the grave of Edward the Confessor, explicitly claiming that it had been the crown of King Arthur. This symbolic act consolidated the histories of the Anglo-Saxons and the legendary Arthur into the history of the English monarchy, “positioning himself as the inheritor of an imperial pedigree comparable to that of Rome.”⁷² Edward’s acquisition of Wales and his rule over parts of Ireland were justified by King Arthur’s control over the British Isles and Edward’s image as his successor.

Medieval kingships stressed the importance of the history of their lands to create a more comprehensive and appealing narrative for their subjects to take pride in and to position themselves as the heirs to ancient heroes. Italy had the Romans and their myths, the Byzantines had Alexander and anything Greek, and even Spain had much stronger connections to the Romans. While both France and England were conquered around the same time, the French spoke Vulgar Latin for much longer and could at least say that their defeat was at the hands of Julius Caesar. Prior to the Roman conquest of parts of England, there was very little written information on the history of the British Isles, giving the English a weak sense of heritage beyond the Roman Empire. Helping to change this absence, the Welsh writer Geoffrey of Monmouth propagated a myth that the British Isles had connections to Greco-Roman mythology. This supposed connection was through a fictional person named Brutus of Troy, a descendant of the hero Aeneas.⁷³ Aeneas was the mythological second cousin of the Trojan prince Hector and is mentioned in the *Iliad*, but really came to fame in Virgil’s *Aeneid*. The *Aeneid* places Aeneas as

⁷² Turner.

⁷³ Geoffrey of Monmouth, *History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Aaron Thompson (Cambridge, Ontario: In Parentheses Publications, 1999), 22.

the ancestor of Romulus and Remus, giving Aeneas and Brutus connections to the Trojans, Greeks, and Romans. According to Geoffrey of Monmouth, after embarking on his own form of an Odyssey, Brutus of Troy became Britain's first king and named the land after himself.⁷⁴ Geoffrey even claims that Brutus split the land when giving it to his sons, creating England, Scotland, and Wales, with the English king acting in the role as high king to Scotland and Wales.⁷⁵ Much like Edward did with King Arthur, the story of Brutus was used by kings to justify the subjugation of Scotland and Wales to England.

The Book by its Cover

Another way that medieval kings used the church to support their power structure was through the importance of ancestry, which helped to justify hereditary rule. Bloodlines were undoubtedly a crucial part of medieval life, especially at the higher levels of society. This focus on heritage was so important that medieval scholars felt that even Jesus Christ needed a great lineage. Being the son of God and the product of a Virgin birth was not enough. The Old Testament's Book of Isaiah creates a lineage from King David to the Messiah, which was named the Tree of Jesse after David's father. According to medieval Christians, Mary descended from David's son, Nathan, making Jesus's mother a relative of the most important biblical king and God himself. Furthermore, Joseph, Jesus' stepfather, was first introduced in the Bible with his genealogy. He was also a descendant of King Solomon, giving Jesus an even greater connection to David. The creation of the tree of Jesse illustrates how vital bloodlines were in Christianity as well as in secular rule. The distinct focus on the Davidic line also shows how important he was to Christians, as numerous Old Testament prophets such as Abraham or Moses could have

⁷⁴ Geoffrey of Monmouth, 20.

⁷⁵ Geoffrey of Monmouth, 23.

achieved a similar effect. One result of the focus on Jesus' bloodline in the medieval era was to have nobility stress that Jesus was a hereditary king due to God's promise to David.

In the modern world, the term "bloodline" is more of a metaphorical representation of lineage rather than a literal belief in blood being inherited. By contrast, medieval Christians believed that familial relationships meant shared blood, particularly between a father and his sons.⁷⁶ While this may initially seem like an insignificant distinction, the importance of blood in medieval Christian society makes it almost unavoidable. The most prominent connection between physical blood and the medieval era comes from the Holy Communion, one of the Church's seven sacraments. According to multiple accounts from the Bible, Jesus gave his disciples bread and wine which he said was his body and blood, telling his disciples to consume them in remembrance of him during the Last Supper.⁷⁷ Communion became a staple for Mass in the Church, with priests performing blessings over bread and wine in the manner that Jesus had. Consuming the blood of Christ is seen as a representation of salvation, giving it a much greater significance than simply an act done to remember Jesus's sacrifice.⁷⁸ The gift of his body and blood can also be seen as him exchanging his own blood for the security of the blood of humankind.⁷⁹ Another way that blood was discussed in medieval society was through the idea of blood libel, a still-existing antisemitic myth that Jewish people used Christian blood for rituals. In the medieval era, Jews were seen as being "cursed by God." This excessive bleeding could supposedly only be controlled by using Christian blood, and the only way to stop the bleeding was to convert to Christianity.⁸⁰ In essence, some medieval Christians believed that their blood

⁷⁶ Peggy McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, the Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 3.

⁷⁷ Matthew 26:26-28 King James Version.

⁷⁸ McCracken, 2.

⁷⁹ Bettina Bildhauer, "Blood in Medieval Cultures," *History Compass* 4, no. 6 (October 27, 2006): 1053.

⁸⁰ McCracken, 104.

was superior to that of non-Christians, and Jews were rumored to have gone so far as to murder Christians to gain access to it. Blood was no mere physical necessity, it could contain holy and unholy attributes which were said to display God's favor.

Ideas about blood were particularly useful to strengthen the divine nature of kingship. The concept of holy powers being transmitted through blood reached its pinnacle in the form of the king's touch. The king's touch (also known as the royal touch) was the idea that monarchs could cure people through physically touching and was used for incurable cases of a disease called scrofula. Scrofula was known as "the King's Evil" and was seen as a representation of sin, especially the collective sins of a kingdom. Edward the Confessor was the first king to practice this royal touch, effectively giving the act the appearance of holiness due to Edward's post-mortem sainthood. The king's touch was also said to "cleanse the body politic and make it more godly," drawing another clear connection between the king's healing and Christianity.⁸¹ Conveniently, the king's touch was not meant to cause immediate healing, and any failed case was said to be a result of the afflicted having a lack of piety. Both English and French monarchs practiced the royal touch in the medieval era, with both kingdoms also anointing their monarchs in the manner of Old Testament kings.⁸² The English ceremony that surrounded the administrations of the royal touch involved a chaplain repeating "They shall lay their hands on the sick and they shall recover,"⁸³ something that Jesus said to his disciples. This tradition, along with the simple fact that these kings were supposed to be creating miracles, shows how monarchs were attempting to imitate Christ. Eventually, the English people began to seek out the royal touch and expected that their king would practice it, showing that the idea was not merely a

⁸¹ Stephen Brogan, *The Royal Touch in Early Modern England: Politics, Medicine, and Sin* (The Boydell Press, 2015), 46.

⁸² Brogan, 47.

⁸³ Mark 16:18 NKJV.

fanciful and disregarded custom of the nobility.⁸⁴ The royal touch in England was justified by the monarch's descent from Edward the Confessor. Although Edward had no children, and thus no direct descendants, and the Norman conquest introduced a ruler that Edward himself had not chosen as his successor, English monarchs used their lineage through Edward's relative, Matilda of Scotland, who married Henry I, to support their claim of inheritance. The Norman conquest provided a rift between the Norman kings and their Anglo-Saxon predecessors, one that could have logically resulted in William the Conqueror being seen as a usurper, but their connection to a king before the conquest who was also a saint gave the Norman kings an undeniable legitimacy. Thus, every medieval English monarch after Edward the Confessor performed the sacred ritual on the basis of heredity.⁸⁵ As was discussed with Henry III and Edward I, English monarchs were more than happy to gloss over the Norman Conquest through the use of their canonized ancestor, and the king's touch was a birthright that came with it which further solidified this succession.

While holiness was a much more intangible example of how hereditary kingship was justified, the connotations purported by the church of physical appearance were used by medieval kings as a much more visible representation of their inherited qualities. The importance of physical blood goes together with the idea that physical characteristics could relate to one's holiness or worthiness. The biblical story of Samson is a prominent example of this concept, with Samson additionally having various thematic connections with Jesus Christ. To start, Samson's infertile mother was visited by an angel who told her that she would give birth to a son who would protect the Israelites from the Philistines.⁸⁶ This event directly mirrors the

⁸⁴ Brogan, 47.

⁸⁵ Brogan, 46.

⁸⁶ Judges 13:7 NIV.

Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel appeared to the Virgin Mary and told her that she would give birth to the son of God. The angel who visited Samson's mother instructed her not to cut her son's hair, which would become the source of his power. Samson was regularly seized by the "Spirit of the Lord," giving him immense strength.⁸⁷ Samson's feats included ripping a lion apart with his bare hands⁸⁸ and killing one thousand Philistines with the jawbone of a donkey, clearly proving Samson's physical prowess was one of a kind.⁸⁹ Later in life, Samson fell in love with a prostitute named Delilah.⁹⁰ Delilah was offered eleven hundred pieces of silver if she was able to discover the source of Samson's strength, a challenge that she accepted.⁹¹ This deal is another example of the connection between Samson and Jesus, as Judas was also paid in silver to betray Jesus. Samson lied to Delilah about the source of his power three times, and Delilah failed to remove his strength each time, but her persistence eventually broke Samson. Samson told Delilah that his hair has never been shaved, and if it were to be cut he would lose his inhuman strength.⁹² Delilah ordered her servants to cut Samson's hair that night and he was subsequently captured by the Philistines, had his eyes gouged out, and was made a slave.⁹³ Eventually, Samson was brought to a Philistine sacrificial ritual in a temple as entertainment.⁹⁴ While being brought in, Samson asked to be allowed to lean on the supporting pillars for rest, but Samson had a much more eternal rest in mind.⁹⁵ Samson's hair had started to grow back while imprisoned, and he prayed that God give him the strength to break the pillars, which he did, killing the three

⁸⁷ Judges 14:6 NIV.

⁸⁸ Judges 14:6 NIV.

⁸⁹ Judges 15:14-16 NIV.

⁹⁰ Judges 16:4 NIV.

⁹¹ Judges 16:5 NIV.

⁹² Judges 16:16 NIV.

⁹³ Judges 16:21 NIV.

⁹⁴ Judges 16:25 NIV.

⁹⁵ Judges 16:26 NIV.

thousand Philistines inside.⁹⁶ Samson's death is another way in which he is similar to Jesus, with the image of Samson pushing his extended arms against two pillars being reminiscent of Jesus on the cross. The two also shared the theme of dying amongst the wicked, as Samson died amongst the Philistine infidels while Jesus was crucified alongside criminals.

The shared themes in the stories of Samson and Jesus show how Samson prefigured Jesus in the way that Christians see much of the Old Testament as pointing towards Christ. For one, Samson gave in to Delilah while Jesus resisted Satan's temptation.⁹⁷ Samson's lust and aggression also contrasted with Jesus who never sinned, and Samson's story ended in a mass killing while Jesus's ended by taking away the sins of the world. The lessons that medieval rulers might have learned from this contrast are readily apparent; the direction of one's power determines its value. Returning to the physical aspect of Christianity, Samson's hair is a representation of his faith in God, much like how people in the medieval era saw various diseases as a physical manifestation of sin.⁹⁸ In essence, medieval Christians saw a person's physical appearance as a reflection of their internal morality and faithfulness. Pope Gregory the Great affirms this concept in his *Book of Pastoral Rule*, listing a number of afflictions such as having, "either a small or a large and crooked nose," as reasons to not have pastoral authority.⁹⁹ In the simplest terms, Pope Gregory explained that these physical characteristics are flaws that hinder one's connection with God, preventing a person from proper worship. A king with the ideal physical appearance could logically be seen as the perfect father to his successor, along with the implications of divinity being hereditary.

⁹⁶ Judges 16:28-30 NIV.

⁹⁷ Matthew 4:1-11 NIV.

⁹⁸ Samson Davis, "Human Physiognomy," *Pamphlet Collection*. (New York: Wilson & Co., Brother Jonathan Press, 1847), 3.

⁹⁹ Gregory, Ch. XI.

When thinking of medieval monarchy, it is hard to separate this form of government from the concept of hereditary kingship that often accompanied it. Still, it would be inaccurate to say monarchies were always seen as something that should be inherited by the ruler's son. Some monarchs had their heirs crowned during their lifetime to strengthen their claim of succession, yet in France, the powerful Capet family waited two centuries to have an heir crowned before the acting king's death. In England, elections were held by the Witenagemot until the eleventh century.¹⁰⁰ Although the Witan still followed the traditional structure of primogeniture by typically electing the former monarch's firstborn son, the mere existence of elections shows that primogeniture was not seen as the only form of succession.

Kings being chosen based on lineage was not blindly and universally accepted during the medieval era, with much of the debate centering around the aptitude of the former king. John of Salisbury believed that "kingly power is not born of flesh and blood, since in the bestowal thereof regard for ancestry ought not to prevail over merits and virtues."¹⁰¹ This viewpoint shows that people in the medieval era were far from being oblivious to the issues that could arise from hereditary kingship, with some instead believing in a meritocracy. John also despised the practice of a king ensuring the succession of his heirs, questioning why, "the poor are crushed beneath wrongs and outrages, made lean with exactions, despoiled by manifold and oft repeated rapine, why are the peoples bidden to clash together in arms and shake the world, to no end but that princes may be succeeded by their natural heirs?"¹⁰² This fierce criticism further shows how the preservation of a family's rule was seen by some to be selfish and destructive. Despite his criticisms, John did not completely reject the use of hereditary kingship, saying that, "the father

¹⁰⁰ Dickinson, 314.

¹⁰¹ Dickinson, 315.

¹⁰² Dickinson, 316.

is succeeded by the son if the latter imitates the father's justice.”¹⁰³ Essentially, John of Salisbury believed that a just and pious king should be succeeded by his heir if he demonstrated the qualities of his predecessor. John also saw this philosophy as an effective way to promote good behavior in monarchs, “since there is nought which men more desire than to have their sons succeed in their possessions, therefore this promise is given to princes as the greatest incentive to the practice of justice.”¹⁰⁴ If a king or his presumed successor was to act in a way that was seen as an abuse of power, this incentive would ideally be withheld, “in execution of the judgment of God, and by virtue of authority derived from Him.”¹⁰⁵ In this way, God was seen as the ultimate deciding force in a claimant’s succession to the throne. If a king lived a life of duty and faith and his heir mirrored these virtues, God would ensure the heir’s succession while doing the opposite for the unworthy. As evidenced by Archbishop Hubert of Canterbury’s references to Saul and David while discussing the matter of succession, much of this philosophy was founded on the examples of the biblical kings of Israel.¹⁰⁶

Hierarchy

The Church itself was just as divided into hierarchy as secular kingdoms, creating a sense that such strict hierarchy was God’s will. Such a structure may seem at odds with the Bible’s teachings and was a frequent criticism of Protestant Reformers after the medieval period, but portions of the Bible loosely affirm a hierarchical society. The first and most obvious is the use of noble titles for God and Jesus, with God being referred to as “the Lord,” and Jesus being

¹⁰³ Dickinson, 316.

¹⁰⁴ Dickinson, 316.

¹⁰⁵ Dickinson, 317.

¹⁰⁶ Dickinson, 317-18.

called “Lord of lords and King of kings.”¹⁰⁷ When questioned about the morality of giving taxes to the pagan power structure of the Roman Empire, Jesus says, “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God.”¹⁰⁸ Essentially, Jesus was saying that one must fulfill one’s worldly duties regardless of one’s faith, and that faith towards God is shown through immaterial ways. This quote may only be explicitly concerning taxation, but its idea can be expanded to the concept of hierarchy. Jesus had revolutionary ideas in terms of morality, values, and religion, but his pacificism prevented him from becoming an armed revolutionary. Jesus undoubtedly opposed the abuse of power structures, but that did not mean that he supported rebelling against them. This fact along with Jesus’ teachings on the damnation of wealth created the narrative that Christians should be satisfied with their lot in life regardless of the hardships the befell them. Jesus said “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven,” and “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”¹⁰⁹ Jesus reaffirmed those who are poor and those who are unambitious, and the effect that these teachings would have on the lower classes is obvious. Regardless of their intentions, Jesus’ teachings work to placate those who might have risen up against their oppressors, as being oppressed was another sign of holiness.¹¹⁰ Additionally, God’s anointments of Saul, David, and Solomon in the Old Testament meant that God was certainly not utterly opposed to the idea of kingship, or else he would have destroyed it instead of choosing the kings and offering the guidance of prophets. Thus, the Bible’s teachings contributed to the continuance of monarchy and the hierarchy it was built upon.

The prevalence of hierarchy in the medieval world can further be shown through the concept of the great chain of being, or put simply the hierarchy of God’s creations. The chain is

¹⁰⁷ Revelation 17:14 NKJV.

¹⁰⁸ Mark 12:17 NLT.

¹⁰⁹ Matthew 5:3-5 NIV.

¹¹⁰ Matthew 5:10 NIV.

actually an expansion of Aristotle's *scala naturae*, or “natural ladder,” which orders earthly things such as humans, animals, plants, and the non-living, from highest to lowest respectively.¹¹¹ Medieval Christianity added God and Angels to the top, and some versions place kings in a separate designation that other humans. Importantly, the great chain of being was believed to be created by God, meaning that there was a natural hierarchy to the world. The ease with which such a concept could be exported to human society is readily apparent, and it could be perceived as God’s affirmation of a world consumed by class structure.

Somewhat surprisingly, medieval scholars were more than willing to centralize power in a monarch’s hands. In an analysis of a document that he claimed to be from Plutarch, John of Salisbury, who is exceptionally critical of his king Henry II (d. 1189), even says that “a prince subject only to God and to those who act in His place on earth.”¹¹² As a clergyman himself, it makes sense that John would exclude the clergy from the king’s subjugation, but he rejects the idea that a king should be held to his vassals’ wishes. That being said, John did believe that the prince should try to help the entire populous, saying, “It is first of all required that the prince evaluate himself entirely and direct himself diligently to the whole body of the republic.”¹¹³ The use of the term republic here is simply a result of this letter supposedly coming from Plutarch, but historians believe that John wrote it himself.¹¹⁴ Considering the praise that he shows towards “Plutarch,” it is easy to see that this document is likely a direct reflection of John’s views that he attempted to use as support for those same views. In Bracton, the author says that a king should be more powerful than all of his subjects, and should remain in power as long as he rules well. Bracton also states that “the king has no equal within his realm,” and that, “The king must not be

¹¹¹ Herbert Granger, “The Scala Naturae and the Continuity of Kinds,” *Phronesis*, vol. 30, no. 2 (1985), 186.

¹¹² John of Salisbury, 67.

¹¹³ John of Salisbury, 66.

¹¹⁴ John of Salisbury, xxi.

under man but under God and under the law, because law makes the king.”¹¹⁵ *Policraticus* and Bracton define differently what makes a good king and what makes a tyrant, however, both fail to launch consistent criticism against the system that allows the tyrant to exist.

The King is Dead

Kings were naturally held to higher standards than common people by medieval scholars as a result of the exponentially greater effect that they had on their kingdoms. John of Salisbury says that the king should be selfless and moral and should stand up for the weak.¹¹⁶ There is also the factor of piety in the judgment of a king, as in his letter that he falsely claimed to be from Plutarch, John says that, “those who direct the practice of religion ought to be esteemed and venerated like the soul in the body.” These ideas are echoes of the writings of the Greek philosophers, with Aristotle arguing that, “the good man is one who is fitted to rule,” and, “those who do most to promote virtue deserve the greatest share of power.”¹¹⁷ This perspective shows that medieval thinkers and their predecessors saw moral character as a necessary part of a high quality ruler, with medieval Christians placing a greater focus on faith as well. Bracton stresses the importance of a king tempering their power with law and following those laws, and how a king becomes a tyrant “when he oppresses by violent domination the people entrusted to his care.”¹¹⁸ During his discussion of various forms of government, Aristotle affirmed the idea that a monarch should be bound by laws, saying “the governing body, whether Few or Many, must be

¹¹⁵ Bracton, 33.

¹¹⁶ Dickinson, 319.

¹¹⁷ Aristotle, 36-37.

¹¹⁸ Bracton, 305.

held in check by the laws.”¹¹⁹ In this view, a good monarchy was far from absolute and the king’s power was balanced by the system of laws which also applied to their people.

During the medieval era, regicide and usurpation were justified through these lenses of what made a good king. In one instance, Archbishop Agobard of Lyons argued that Lothair I’s rebellion against his father and the successor to Charlemagne, Louis the Pious, was justified due to Lothair’s “duty to restore and purify the palace that evildoers had made a brothel.”¹²⁰

Archbishop Agobard’s reasoning was based on the ideas that a king should be a beacon of faith and the perceived importance of maintaining strong familial relations. Regardless of whether Agobard’s accusations were true or not, adultery is a sin that is listed in the Ten Commandments, and the damage that adultery does to familial relations is readily apparent. A common courtly phrase was that a king should rule in three ways, “by ruling first himself, second his own wife and children and the members of his household, third the people committed to him.”¹²¹ This quote highlights that control over oneself and those closest to them was seen as a crucial part of a good reign. Although failing to fulfill these prerequisites was seen as a justification for overthrowing a ruler, tyrannicide was viewed as a separate affair with different criteria.

Much of the doctrine regarding tyrannicide in the medieval era was based on biblical stories. John of Salisbury’s *Policraticus* was an important document when it came to the topic of tyrannicide, influencing later medieval thinkers with its somewhat radical ideas.¹²² Building on the widely accepted views of power being bestowed by God, John saw tyranny itself as God punishing sinful people.¹²³ This idea becomes confusing when put beside John’s opinion that, “it

¹¹⁹ Aristotle, 37.

¹²⁰ Nelson, 220.

¹²¹ Nelson, 220.

¹²² Dickinson, 329.

¹²³ John of Salisbury, 119.

is not only permitted, but it is also equitable and just to slay tyrants.”¹²⁴ John clarified that the justice behind the act of tyrannicide is dependent on how the king received his position, meaning “he who has rashly usurped that which is not his, not to he who receives what he uses from the power of God.” John referenced the biblical example of Saul and David, as although Saul breaking his own laws would have classified him as a tyrant, David refrains from killing him. John continued by saying, “this method of eradicating tyrants is the most useful and the safest: those who are oppressed should humbly resort to the protection of God's clemency and, raising up pure hands to the Lord in devoted prayer, the scourge with which they are afflicted will be removed.”¹²⁵ So while John viewed tyrannicide as naturally beneficial, he believed that such extreme decisions should rest in the hands of God rather than the people. It is easy to see how such a philosophy could result in stagnation and inaction to benefit of tyrants. If a tyrant's faithful subjects subscribed to John's ideas, then they would see tyranny as either a necessary punishment or an evil that God would be sure to cure.

Conclusion

Despite the religious intensity of the era, perspectives on monarchy during the medieval era often owed their conception to the Bible, idealized views of historical figures, or Greek philosophers. Aristotle and Plato were directly opposed to monarchies, but Aristotle specified that his reservations came from the fact that it was unreasonable to assume that most monarchs would be worthy of such a position of power. Medieval Christianity responded to this criticism by claiming that their rulers were chosen by God, thus making them the pre-eminent individuals

¹²⁴ John of Salisbury, 25.

¹²⁵ John of Salisbury, 209.

that Aristotle said could create an ideal government. The progression of the Kingdom of Israel from Saul to David and finally to Solomon showed medieval Christians how kings were meant to act and how God's favor could be lost due to unfaithfulness and tyranny. Saul became the first king of Israel with God's blessing, but the latter days of his reign were marred by greed and paranoia. As a result, the virtuous David was anointed by Samuel in accordance with God's will, showing that God's blessing was contingent on the king's behavior. God's promise to David that his line would rule forever was met with the condition that his house would always be in conflict. David's son, Solomon, would succeed him but only after a power struggle. Solomon's greed and support for false idols caused God to divide the kingdom upon his death, showing how even someone as wise as Solomon could be tempted by sin. These examples act as guidance for how kings can win God's favor, but they also teach that God's favor is not guaranteed after it is won. A good king must strive continuously to be righteous in order to stay in God's favor.

The Roman Empire was another source of inspiration for the medieval world, with some thinkers viewing certain Roman leaders with respect and reverence. This perspective worked to support the idea of centralized power, as scholars of the medieval era idealized the success and glory of Roman Emperors while putting aside their mistreatment of Christians. Due to his promotion of Christianity, medieval Christians elevated Constantine to an even higher tier, and his relationship with the Church set the precedent for the codependency of the Church and state during the medieval era. Constantine's authority within the medieval world was even posthumously abused by the Church to support their claim of authority over all of Europe.

To justify their rule to their vassals in particular, medieval kings drew ancestral connections between themselves and legendary figures. England was a primary culprit of this, attempting to create the narrative that they were the successors of Brutus of Troy, King Arthur,

and Constantine the Great. The English royal family capitalized on these legends to justify the English royal family's reign through their idealized images. English monarchs also highlighted their much more real connections with Edward the Confessor, importantly the only English king to ever be canonized. This emphasis shows how medieval Christians saw sainthood, or at least the qualities associated with it, as something that could be hereditary. Propaganda such as this further underscores how secular rulers utilized religion to solidify their positions of power.

The use of religion by medieval kings can also be found in their justifications for hereditary rule. God's promise to David can be viewed as God's support of hereditary monarchy when a predecessor was worthy of such an honor. Additionally, the importance of blood in the Bible is profound, and Christians viewed it as much more than just necessary bodily fluid for the functioning of life. Blood was seen as being able to carry traits on from generation to generation, including holy powers such as the king's touch. Physical characteristics, which are obviously scientifically genealogical, were also seen as indicators of moral qualities, and this idea was propagated by some of the highest ranking religious leaders of the era.

Although medieval religious figures were sometimes open to a king being overthrown, the conditions of their support made the line between a just replacement and usurpation was thin. The removal of tyrants from power was seen as a just action, but the reign of said tyrants was also confusingly said to be the will of God. Only when the tyrant's subjects freed themselves from sin could the tyrant be overthrown, but one may have found it difficult to tell when this point was. King David was revered for his self-control in sparing Saul's life, and thus it was seen as ideal to let God decide when a tyrant's reign was finally over.

The relationship between the church and state during the medieval era was a complicated mess of support and power struggles. Secular rulers constantly used the Church and its teachings

to consolidate their power and the Church was no stranger to doing the opposite. Monarchs were also keen to further legitimize themselves through vague connections with biblical, legendary, and important historical figures. The Bible set the standard for how medieval kings should act, and its stories of anointed kings provided an opportunity for a convenient religious support of whomever was currently in power. Monarchs exploited the codependent relationship between secular states and the Church while conforming their constructions of ideal kingship to traditionally respected views on centralized governments and its leaders. The powerful further justified their mandate through their connections to legendary and historical figures which lent further credence to their depictions as preeminent rulers.

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